

# A Q method investigation of individual value-priorities in subjective well-being: Understanding what makes well-being matter

Christopher M Drayton, MSc & Diane J Wildbur, PhD  
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

## Introduction

Contemporary models of subjective well-being (SWB) include:

**The Hierarchic Model of Well-Being** (Gallagher, Lopez and Preacher 2009), which integrates 14 Hedonic, Eudaimonic and Social components of SWB. E.g: Affect, life satisfaction, relationships, growth , social contribution.

**The Nested Model of Well-being** (Henriques, Kleinman & Asselin, 2014) proposes that value systems help evaluate and define individual approaches to SWB interacting with biological psychological socio-emotional and environmental domains of SWB.

Schwartz (1994; 2012), argues that 10 **competing values** are linked to cognition and affect regulating behaviour. Eg hedonism, benevolence, security.

Research must address dynamic component interactions that challenge investigation of SWB and differences in cognition and emotion contributing to signature concepts of and paths to SWB. (Samman 2007, Reitzner 2014, Deiner, Lucas & Scollon, 2006: Kashdan Biswas Diener & King 2008, Nelson et al 2014). A value-based belief system, (VBLS) could integrate understanding of component interactions to devise individual interventions for well-being (Tiberius & Hall 2010). The current investigation therefore aimed to inform theory exploring the question:

**How do individual value-priorities influence participants’ constructions of personal well-being?**

## Method

Q Method is a correlation-based Quali-quantological research method , adapted from the Spearmans’ *r* method of factor analysis (Stephenson, 1935), for comprehensive holistic investigation of the subjective views of individuals and groups (Watts and Stenner 2012).

A concourse of viewpoints integrating 86 hedonic, eudaimonic and social value priorities, (Gallagher et al 2009) and basic human values (Schwartz 2012), was developed, then piloted by peers with specialised knowledge of psychological well-being using a specialised rating scale. Values rated as less than 25% relevant to well-being were removed to produce a final Q set of 60 items. Q set Statements typically followed from a prefix “It is important to...” or, “It is Important to me to...

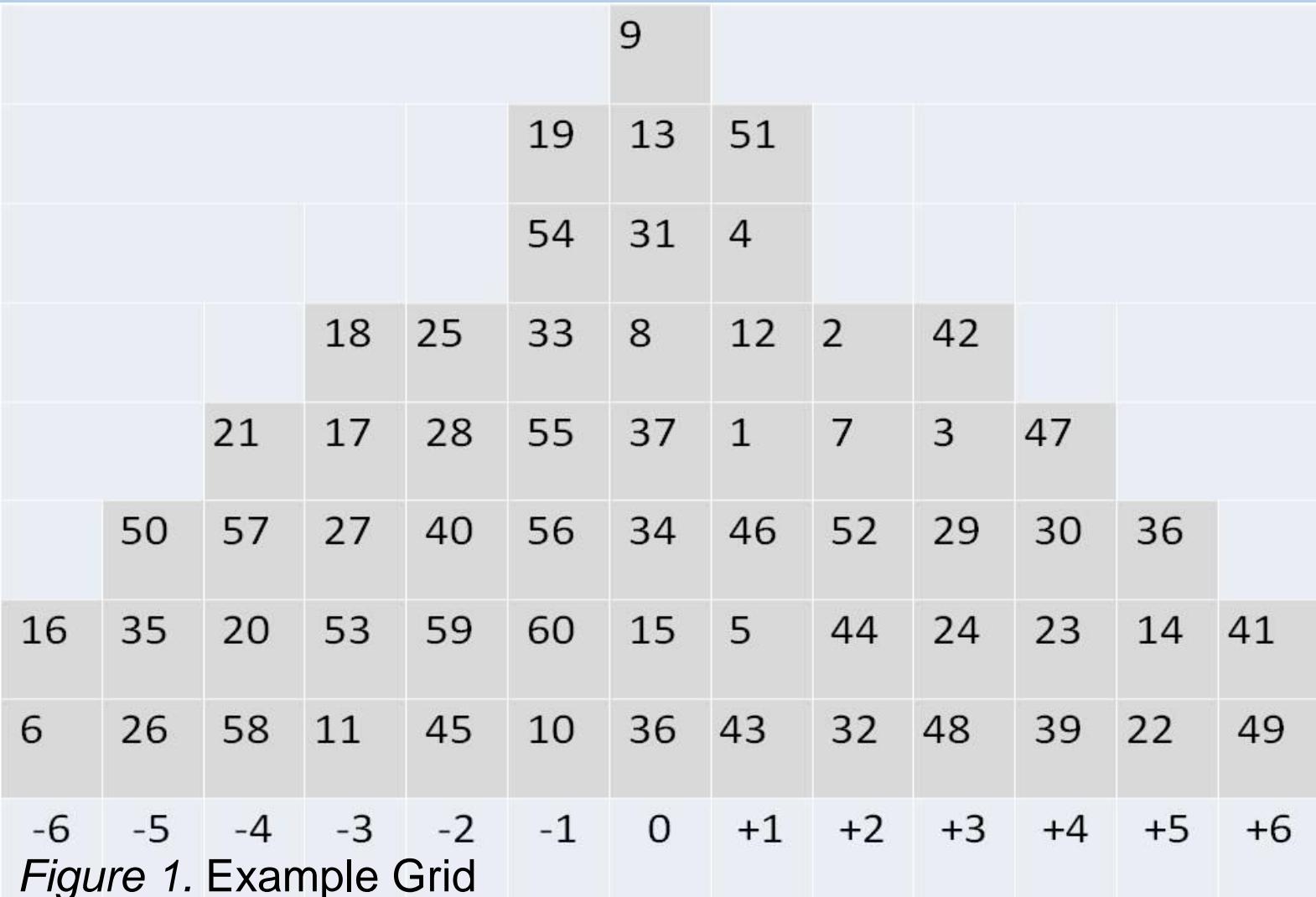


Figure 1. Example Grid

A sample of 30 participants (12 male, 18 female; 19-66 years) performed the Q sort task, ranking 60 value statements according to subjective importance on a 13-point forced choice distribution grid ranging from -6 (most unimportant) to +6 (most important) – See *Figure 1*. These quantified data were

subjected to factor analysis and factor extraction using principle component analysis with Varimax rotation. Correlated data sets loading on separate factors with an Eigenvalue of .06 or above were merged forming holistic factor arrays subjected to holistic interpretive analyses.

## Analysis & Discussion

Thirteen participants (8 male 5 female), loaded significantly on five factors, (Factors 1,2 and 3; three loadings), (Factors 4 and 5; two loadings), accounting for 53% of the sample variance. Holistic analyses identified five themes discussed below.

### Theme 1: Exploring life through choices

- Participants view well-being as being true to themselves, entailing retaining autonomy to evaluate choices ,maintaining positive self-direction, purpose and contribution to society. Fairness helps evaluate choices, relationship quality and manage conflicting emotions maintaining well-being. This facilitates confident exploration of new exciting experiences and stimulating hedonic activities, while career commitment provides independent growth. This takes priority over social interactions, or emotional validation through relationships. Relationships outside family maintain important self-directed social and emotional growth.

### Theme 2: Faith, family, acceptance and balance

- Faith provides critical existential support strength and guidance beyond the physical and emotional environment, while spiritual groups provide supportive socio-emotional integration and a stable environment. Kindness and forgiveness are evaluative standards for self-acceptance and relationship quality. Family relationships are the foundation for emotional security and stability that help accept or overcome stressful, disappointing or sad experiences and maintain emotional balance. The future goal of becoming a parent provides growth and stability. Emotional stability and balance are more important to well-being than social exploration, power or hedonic exposure to new, exciting pleasurable experiences.

### Theme 3: Keeping family close and embracing life

- Well-being is derived from positive family relationships which provide social integration and shared emotional exploration of new exciting experiences, taking priority over other relationships or experiences. Fairness, forgiveness and honesty help define and evaluate relationship quality and family comes first. Emotional engagement with family helps embrace positive experiences, but career commitments cultivate self-direction, purpose and independent positive growth, facilitating self-acceptance. Self-acceptance takes priority over social acceptance, vicarious emotional validation and security.

### Theme 4: Finding positive meaning in the world

- Social, emotional and interpersonal engagement helps participants find positive meaning in the world critical to personal well-being. Families integrate environmental and emotional stability, while friends and partners provide independent emotional and interpersonal growth. Social interaction is not valued for exposure to new exciting hedonic experiences, but is valued above social disengagement, relaxation or solitude. Positive attachments depend on: kindness, honesty forgiveness and optimistic trust. Social contribution through loving actions cultivates purpose and self-acceptance but participants retain awareness of stressors in daily experiences to actively maintain emotional resilience. Independent career and academic goals cultivate self-direction, stability and fulfilment for the future.

### Theme 5: Being true to self and defining boundaries

- Individuals view being true to themselves as vital to their personal sense of well-being. This entails the ability to define their own emotional behavioural and interpersonal expectations and the boundaries that maintain well-being. Relationship quality depends on boundaries of trust, honesty and fairness above kindness or forgiveness, cultivating socio-emotional security, calm and clarity, Participants strategically avoid emotional threats, confronting stress, sadness and disappointment but avoiding anxiety. Emotionally grounded perceptions are important alongside exciting social experiences that cultivate supportive friendships, family support is secondary. Career and academic commitment facilitates independent growth and self-direction.

Values across the 5 factors display dynamic interactions between well-being components. All participants value some form of self-direction and personal growth through career (Factors 1, 3, 4 &5) or care giving (Factor 4), alongside relationships in their socio-emotional environment. For some, family provides emotional stability (Factor 2); for others, new experiences (Factor 3). In other cases friendships provide primary emotional support and growth (Factors 1 & 4). Varied emphasis on different Eudaimonic, virtues (kindness, fairness, forgiveness, honesty) determines how interpersonal dynamics operate across all 5 factors influencing concepts of positive socio-emotional relationships. Current findings implicate values as interactive evaluative components linked to affect, cognition, behaviour regulation and diverse constructs of well-being (Schwartz 2012: Henriques et al., 2014 (Deiner, et al, 2006: Kashdan et al., 2008, Nelson et al 2014 Tiberus and Hall 2010).

**Findings demonstrate that subjective value-priorities facilitate dynamic interactions between components of well-being contributing to distinct well-being constructs. Future research could employ Q methodology in mixed methods cross sectional research with multiple age cohorts investigating long term changes in value priorities and perceived barriers to well-being.**



**Contact:** Dr Diane J Wildbur,  
Faculty of Health & Life Sciences  
De Montfort University, The Gateway,  
Leicester, LE1 9BH  
Email: [dwildbur@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:dwildbur@dmu.ac.uk)

## Key References

Gallagher, M.W., Lopez, S.J., & Preacher, K.J., (2009). The hierarchical structure of well-being. *Journal of Personality*, 77(4): 1025-1050.  
Heniques, G., Kleinman, K.E., & Asselin, C. (2014). The nested model of well-being: A unified approach, *Review of General Psychology*, 18(1): 7-18.  
Watts, S., & Stenner, P.(2012). *Doing Q methodological research: Theory, method and interpretation*. London UK: Sage Publications Limited.